

Organising meetings

Organising a successful meeting takes time and planning. Try to allow plenty of time to plan and publicise the meeting and ask others to help. There are a number of elements to consider when planning a meeting.

Purpose

What is the central purpose of the meeting? Why is it important for members to be there? Thinking about the purpose will enable you to clarify what needs to be covered and keep control of the agenda. If the purpose is advertised clearly then this will help generate attendance and support for the meeting. Think about inviting non-members; this is not always appropriate but it can build support for issues and offer an opportunity for recruitment at the same time.

Time and place

Think about when would be the best time for a meeting. Ask departmental representatives what they think. If your campaign is aimed at a particular group of people, such as part-timers or contract research staff, then check with someone from that group to ensure that you plan the meeting for a time when they will be able to attend. Consider whether your campaign would be best served by one large general meeting or meetings held in specific departments – how are you going to involve the greatest amount of people? Consider the dates of other meetings that you may need to feed into, for example: local committee, general, or college/university meetings. The venue needs to be comfortable and accessible for everyone. If the meeting will involve people from other sites consider rotating the venue.

Duration

Don't make the meeting too long. Let people know in advance when it will end so they know what they are committing themselves to.

Refreshments

Always a good idea, particularly if you are going to be holding your meeting at lunchtime. When you plan your campaign you should have built in specific resources for this type of event. Think about how you are going to organise the refreshments. You need to make sure that people are paying attention to the subject being discussed and are not being

side-tracked on how they can balance their plates and coffee at the same time! If you provide food then give people time to sort themselves out at the beginning before you start the meeting.

Involvement

Involve as many people in organising the meeting as possible. You could, ask people if they would be willing to, for example: bring refreshments; photocopy and distribute the agenda; help to set up the room; talk about an experience or concern they have had related to your campaign; take notes and write up a report; or, very helpfully, bring along colleagues, particularly new members of staff.

Agenda

Members need to know that the issues covered at the meeting will be relevant to them and that they will be able to discuss issues that are important to them. You need to decide whether you want this meeting to be specifically about your campaign or whether you are using your campaign as an issue to get members along to hear about other associated issues as well. Make sure that you are clear about the issues to be discussed in your publicity.

Remember:

- Don't put too many things on one agenda.
- If you have a lot of information to present, involve a number of different people.
- Ensure that there is alternation between presentations and discussions.
- Leave plenty of time for discussion.
- Make sure the discussion has a purpose. It helps if there is something you want members to decide, advise you on, plan, or help you with.
- There's no point in making decisions unless you intend to implement them. What will implementing the decisions involve? Leave time in the meeting to discuss implementation plans and to identify who will take responsibility for what.
- Write an agenda with approximate times for how long each item will take. Think about what the meeting will feel like for participants.
- Decide who will facilitate the meeting.

Speakers

Inviting a guest speaker to your meeting can make the event more interesting to your members. If you do decide to do this, then make sure that this is included in the publicity. If the person is a guest speaker from outside the college or university then make sure that someone is assigned to look after them. Make sure that they know when to turn up and

how long they will be expected to speak for. Let the speaker know if you expect them purely to speak, or whether you will want them to answer questions. Make sure that they have a copy of the agenda and know when they will be expected to speak – are they on first or will they have to wait while you go through administrative matters, like agreeing minutes? Check with them to see what time they have to leave, and whether they will need transport sorted out for them.

If your campaign is about a specific management initiative, such as redundancies or fixed-term contracts, you might want to invite someone from the college or university management to address the meeting. There are some serious advantages to doing this, not least because it makes sure that members are aware of who has the responsibility for making the decision. It is not unusual for trade union representatives to find themselves taking the blame for a university or college proposal – this is merely shooting the messenger. Let members identify the real problem. If you do this then you need to think about whether you will let the management representative stay in for the whole meeting or whether they should leave once their part is finished.

Turnout

If you have put a lot of time and effort into planning a meeting you'll want to make sure people come. Members have many competing demands on their time. However, they will make time for something if they know why it is important. Part of holding a successful meeting is making sure that you have explained to your members, clearly and in person, why they need to be there. Attending meetings should become something members expect to do, whether it is a general membership meeting or a departmental meeting. To maximise attendance: tell people about the meeting in as many ways as you can – put a message about the meeting on the noticeboards, on doors, in the local newsletter, and send people an email invitation/reminder. The best way to get people to a meeting is to ask them in person, so ask some colleagues to help you to invite everyone in the department. Decide as a group how many people need to come if the meeting is to be a success, then divide the members in the department between you. Make it clear that you won't count someone as coming unless they have said unambiguously that they will. Discuss what you will say when you invite people, and also don't forget to ask the people who are helping you out to get back in touch and give you an estimate of how many people have agreed to attend.

When inviting someone to a meeting remember to explain:

- why you are holding the meeting
- what the meeting is about and what will happen at the meeting
- why it is important to them to be there - what they will get out of it
- why it is important to you and other people for them to be there
- when and where the meeting is being held and how long it will last.

Ask them for a commitment to attend the meeting – people will judge the importance of the meeting on what you tell them. If you are easily put off, they'll think it doesn't really matter. Being persistent about getting a commitment lets them know that their presence is important.

Facilitating the meeting

Most workplace meetings can be fairly informal and this is often more comfortable for everyone. However, informality sometimes means that it's comfortable for people who are already in the know, but not for newcomers. It's important to make sure that everyone knows who everybody is, knows any conventions you observe about how discussions are conducted, understands what is being discussed, and is encouraged to participate. If you have a lot to say or have a strong opinion, you may want to ask someone else to facilitate the meeting. The facilitator should intervene as little as possible and refrain from comment on the issue under discussion. If it is going to be a large meeting it might be helpful to use an aid for the facilitator – someone who can keep an eye on the time and check that all of the people that have indicated that they would like to speak have been asked to do so.

On the day:

- Start the meeting with introductions.
- Make sure everyone can see an agenda.
- Give a brief overview of the meeting and explain what it is for.
- Explain any jargon or abbreviations.
- Leave plenty of time for discussion and encourage everyone to participate, ask for contributions from people who are quiet or new.
- Keep to the times on the agenda.
- ~ Don't let one or two individuals dominate the dialogue.
- Deal with one agenda item at a time.
- If appropriate, make sure that at the end of a discussion the group makes a clear, firm decision.
- Make sure that everyone understands what implementing their decisions will involve – ask members to do something specific in support of the decision they have made. This is your chance to ensure that the membership realises that they are the ones that will make the campaign a success. Don't let them leave the meeting thinking that they can leave it all up to you!
- Make sure that important issues and decisions are noted.
- At the end of the meeting explain what will happen next and when they will next be involved.

Checklist

- Think about the purpose of your meeting.
- Work out the best time to hold a meeting.
- Make sure that the venue is accessible to as many people as possible. If you have a multi-site university or college then consider running meetings on all sites.
- Be aware of the time it will take to hold the meeting. Don't let it go on too long.
- Think about refreshments and how they will be handled in the meeting.
- Make sure that there is a clear agenda.
- Give people clear responsibilities for specific tasks – is someone assigned to inviting the guest speaker and looking after them on the day? Does someone have responsibility for coordinating publicity?
- Make sure that the person facilitating the meeting knows what needs to be achieved at the meeting and is aware of the time the meeting should last.
- Give someone the responsibility for chasing up volunteers after the meeting. If people offer to help then make sure they are given something to do, otherwise they might not offer in the future!
- Think about publicity after the meeting. Make sure that the decision taken at the meeting are fed back to those that could not attend.